

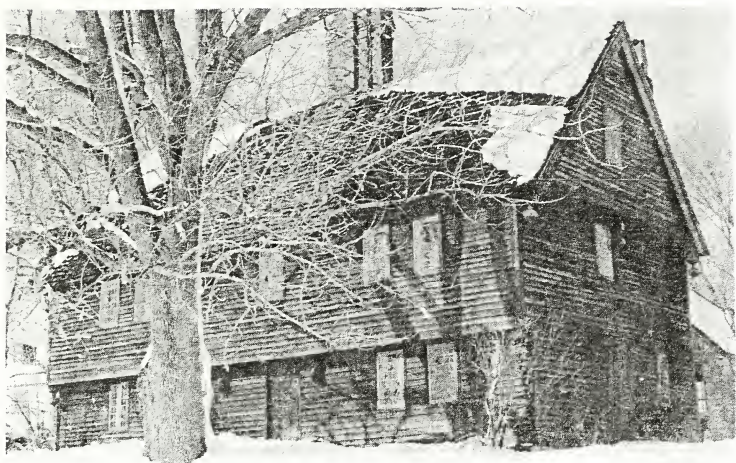


THE PARSON CAPEN HOUSE
Topsfield, Massachusetts

by Deborah Dupouy

Photography Jane English

PUBLISHED BY
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THE PARSON CAPEN HOUSE Topsfield, Massachusetts

The "Parson" Capen House sets on a knoll in the center of Topsfield, Massachusetts, a town not far from Danvers and historic Salem. Today it is one of the best preserved houses of the early colonial period and is probably the finest surviving example of Elizabethan architecture in America.

Reverend Joseph Capen came to the Topsfield church from Dorchester, Massachusetts in the early 1680's. The parish promised him a salary of twenty pounds in silver and forty-five pounds in country pay (such as corn, pork, and keep). It is said that Priscilla, the young bride of Capen, and daughter of the well-to-do John Appleton of Ipswich, did not care for the small parsonage owned by the town, so in 1683 Joseph built her a fine manor house on twelve acres of land given to him by the town. Parson Capen served his congregation for forty years, including the period of the Salem Witchcraft delusion. During the years he preached, a new meeting house was built just across the "Common" from his home. He died July 30, 1725 and lies beside his wife in the Pine Grove Cemetery. His grave marks the spot where his pulpit stood in the meeting house built in 1663. ¹

The first houses built by the earliest settlers along the New England coast were small, crude huts and cabins, the type seen at the Pioneer Village in Salem, and the Plimouth Plantation. But in a few years, with more leisure time and additional manpower, these were replaced by more permanent structures. These homes built by the colonists in the seventeenth century were designed mainly from their memories of the homes they had left in England. It was not until the end of the century that manuals of architecture and building, published in England, were available to the settlers. And not until the end of the eighteenth century did the first professionally trained architects appear in America. ²

Yet, in the seventeenth century the buildings were still an outcome of circumstance and not choice. The simple plan of a central chimney stack flanked by two rooms and sometimes a second story, was used without variation in the Massachusetts Bay and Plimouth Colonies. The plan was strictly dictated by economy and availability of materials and labor. But the rooms were large and were probably more comfortable than we imagine. ³

The Parson's house was well built even for its day, and it possesses architectural features unknown on other existing dwellings of the period. "Every detail of the house proclaims the frugality and yet dignity of a Puritan divine, the respect in which he held himself and which the community afforded him." ⁴

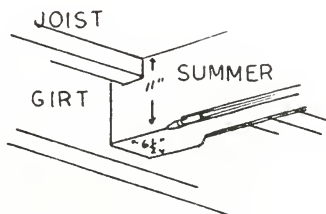
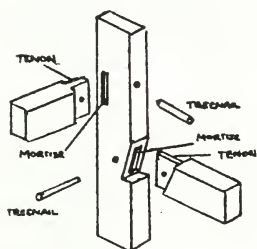
The Capen House, like nearly every seventeenth century New England house, faces south. ⁵ The hall which served as a living room, dining room, and kitchen combined is on the east end. The parlor, used for retirement and entertainment of special guests, is on the west side of the massive chimney. A tree like the one old tree which stands conspicuously to the right of the front door, was probably planted by the Capens to protect the hall from storms in winter and the hot sunlight in summer.

Cellars were seldom found in English homes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but were always found in New England at least under the hall. The Capen house cellar extends under the entire house and is reached through a trap door in the hall. It is room height under this half. The cellar under the rest of the house is one half room height. The parlor floor is lined with a mixture of clay and straw filled between the joists for insulation. ⁶ Because this was a minister's house, this extra comfort was afforded

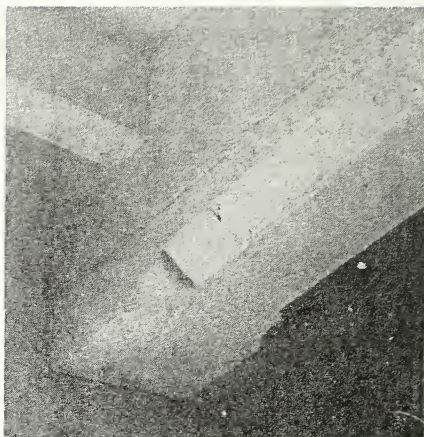
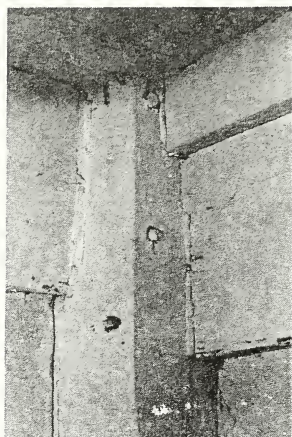
in the parlor where the family was frequently entertaining. The cellar space was a means of separating the first floor from the cold ground and also provided storage space for food. It was cool in summer and every autumn the foundation was banked with dead leaves to keep it from freezing in winter. ⁷

The foundation of the New England house was usually fieldstone. Rough stones were plentiful. The Capen foundation was laid without mortar of any kind, but sometimes the stones were set in clay. The foundation is barely visible as the house sits low on the ground. The sills, the large foundation timbers, rest directly on the underpinning of fieldstones and are the basis for the frame.

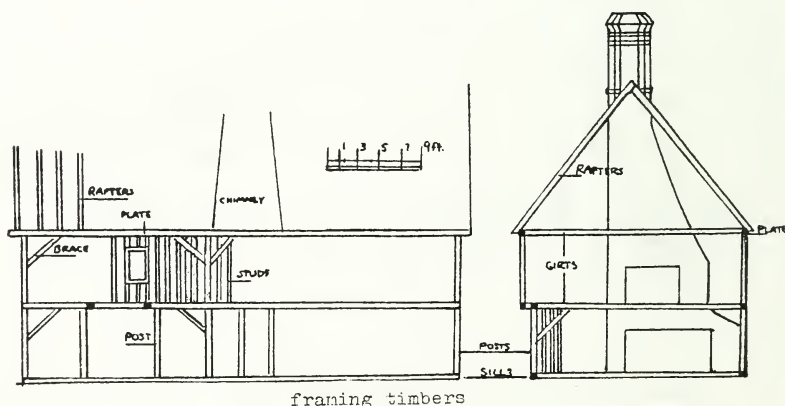
Framing methods were borrowed directly from the mother country. Seventeenth century houses in England were entirely timber framed. Oak seems to have been used consistantly for framing in both England and America. ⁸ (An interesting exception is the pine-framed John Ward House in Salem.) Framing timbers were always hand hewn with ax and adze. The massive skeleton was sturdy and lasting. Timbers had to be large because they carried the weight of the entire house including a heavy load of filling and plaster. ⁹ Timbers were mortised and tenoned together. The joints were cut with an auger, chisel, and mallet. The round wooden pins which hold the joints in place are the treenails (pronounced "trunnels"). Ten kinds of framing timbers which were employed in the colonial house have remained standard in frame construction for more than two centuries: sill, post, girt, plate, summer beam, joist, rafter, purloin, stud, and brace. ¹⁰



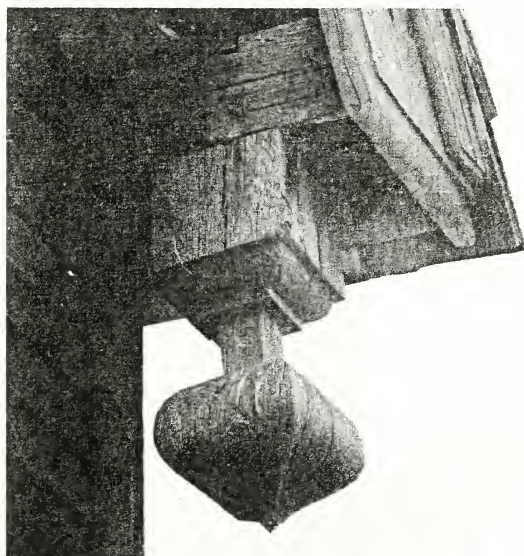
The term "summer beam" was derived from the name "sumpter," a packhorse that carried a heavy load. The summers bear the weight



of the floors above. ¹¹ The summer beams of the "Parson" Capen House are of special interest. The chamfering is plainly seen. As was typical of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Capen summer beams run north and south, mortised into the front and rear girts. It was common in the Plymouth and Connecticut settlements for the summers to run from end girt to chimney girt. ¹² In the parlor of the "Parson" Capen House is the rare feature of two summer beams. Under the north end of one of the beams is carved with a chisel the date, JULYye 8, 1683. The exact date when the frame was raised, found here, is not found elsewhere in as old a house.



The strong overhangs at the front and gable ends of the Capen House are framed rather than hewn. This method of construction was common in old English work. Morrison, in his book on Early American Architecture, makes several suggestions as to the purpose of the overhang. It is one of the most common features of seventeenth century architecture. Morrison suggests that in England the overhang was used to give added space to the second story of the narrow town houses. But this was not a necessity in the open New England countryside. Perhaps the overhang in America was a defense feature from Indians. But this is highly unlikely since the overhang occurs only on three sides. What was to prevent the Indians from attacking from the rear! And there are no machicolations or trap doors as were found in the overhangs of Medieval English fortresses. Morrison also suggests the possibilities that the overhang was protection from the rain, or that perhaps it was felt that the two posts of the framed overhang were stronger than one continuous beam.¹³ The suggestions are all interesting but the fact remains that although the colonists lived simply, they took pride in their homes and it is highly possible that the overhang was adapted solely for its architectural effect.



The roof pitch of the "Parson" Capen House is steep (fifteen inches to a foot) and is simply framed. There is no ridgepole.

The rafters are joined with lap joints. The boarding under the shingles of houses of this period ran up and down instead of across as in present day construction. ¹⁴ The slope of 50° found on most early houses gradually reduced to 45° as time progressed. The Whitefield House in Guilford, Connecticut, 1639, has an unusually steep pitch of 60° . ¹⁵

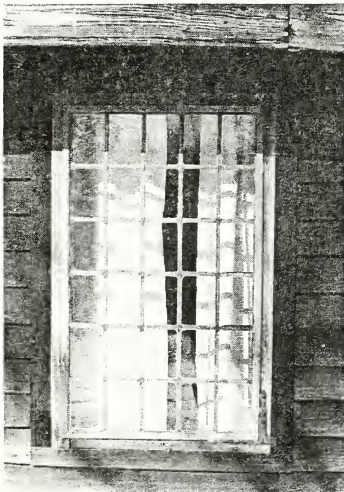
The erection of a house frame became a community social event in early New England. It can be certain that the "raising" of the minister's house was an extra special event. Preparations for a raising bee were made weeks in advance. Men would dig the cellar and lay the foundation and the sills. Dozens of treenails were whittled. Every piece of timber required for the frame was cut and notched. The joints were usually hewn with much skill. Many of the colonists had learned carpentry in England before coming to America. In the meantime, women prepared quantities of food for the festive day. ¹⁶

On the raising day the entire front and rear wall frames were assembled flat on the ground. The oak beams were heavy and many men were needed to lift them. Pikes (metal-tipped poles) were used to raise the frames in place. As both sides were raised other men inserted the end girts into the mortised corner posts, and the treenails driven in. After the remaining beams and braces had been put in place the frame was ready for floor boards, wall and roof boards, shingles, clapboards and interior and exterior finish.

The entire house was sheathed with clapboards. In England the timber framing was often exposed externally in the form of the Tudor half-timber framed construction. But there are no surviving examples of this in America. The rough climate would have probably disintegrated the exposed filling between the studs. Several types of filling were used in America, all similar to English types: clay and chopped straw formed into rolls, wattle and daub or wattle and a clay and straw mixture, or brick nogging. Since brick was scarce, a crude, sun-dried brick was used in America. But this crude brick filling was still the most sophisticated form used in the Colonies. The filling provided insulation and is the chief element of thickness and weight in the wall. ¹⁸ The clapboards which protect the exterior of the Capen House are of red oak although pine is not uncommon on houses of the period. Clapboards were originally called "clayboards" because they covered the clay filling between the frame. ¹⁹ In

England they were called "weatherboards" and were six to nine inches wide, of oak or elm. American clapboards of the period were five inches at the widest and long enough to cover three or four studs. A "fro" was used to split the boards into their wedge shape. Hand-forged nails were used to fasten the clapboards to the frame. They overlap about an inch so the exposed surface is about four inches wide. 20

The roof is finished with wooden, hand riven shingles, one to three feet long. Thatch, like that used in England, had been employed for a time. And wood had even been used for chimneys. The frequency of roof and house fires, however, eventually forced the passing of a law that no chimney stack could be of wood. But wood was an abundant material and brick was rare, so frequently the chimney was of wood with only the fireplaces and chimney top made of brick. The affluence of the minister's family is seen in the all brick chimney of the "Parson" Capen House. The bricks were brought from England as ballast in a ship. The massive, central chimney is built on a stone foundation set into the ground. The stack diminishes in size as it rises. The chimney top is pilastered in the design of the homes of Tudor England. This type of ornamentation is not usually found in America. It should be noted that the Capen House does lack the dormers protruding from the roof on either side of the chimney. This seems to be the only characteristic feature of the period lacking in the Capen House. 21

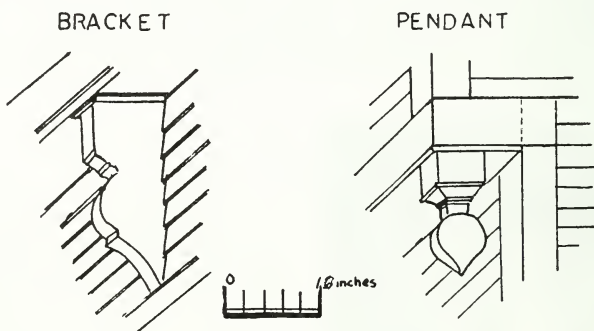


The window openings are small, and the casements have small, square glass panes rather than the more common diamond shape. But even these small windows in the Capen House were luxury compared to the empty openings in many houses of the time. Glass was scarce and expensive since it had to be imported from

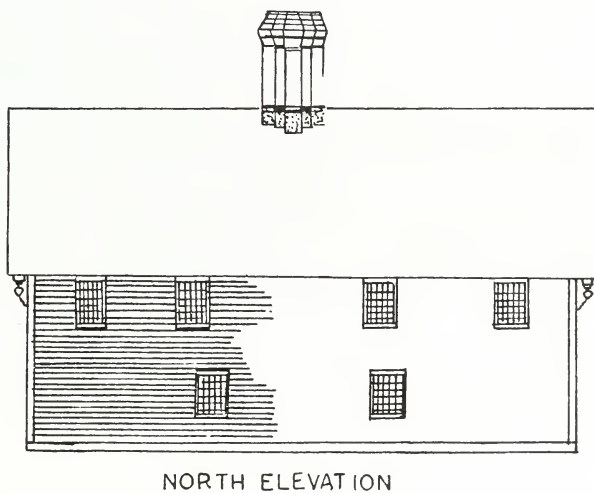
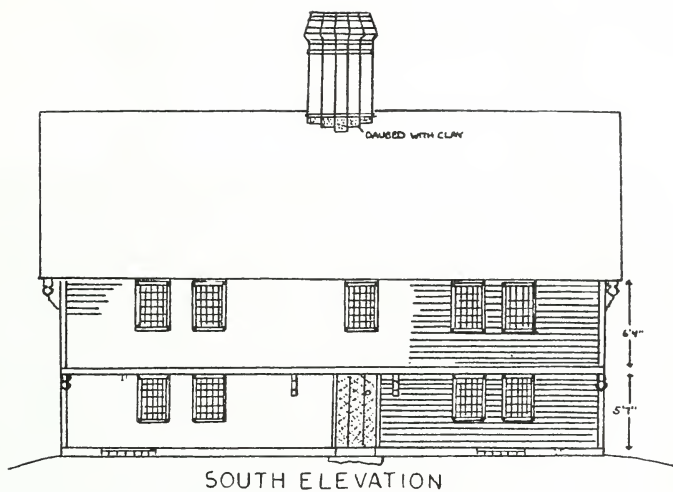
England. Most was Newcastle glass and was only one sixteenth of an inch thick. The few original panes which remain can be distinguished by their rough surfaces and amber or violet tints. 22 The present leaded casements were reproduced in England when the house was restored in 1914.

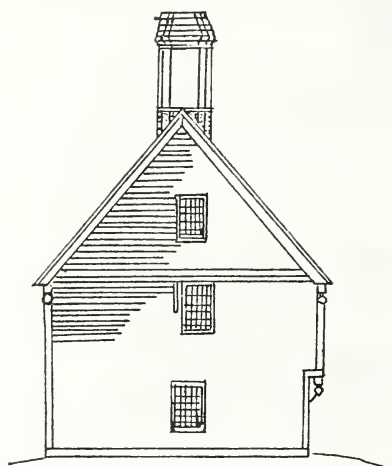
The front door of the "Parson" Capen House is a copy of the "Indian Door" found at Deerfield, Massachusetts. The door is two thicknesses of board, the outer running vertically and the inner horizontally. The outside is studded in a diagonal pattern with hand-forged nails, a feature designed for protection against Indian arrows. The iron latch ring is also a reproduction and long, metal strap hinges attach the door on the inside. As was typical, the Capen front door sill rests practically on ground level and a large, flat rock serves as a door step.

The "Parson" Capen House is exceptional in that it possesses architectural embellishments rarely found on other homes of the period, another affirmation of the status and well-being of the minister's family. The wide, verge boards, the brackets which support the overhangs, and the carved drops hanging at the corners of the house are purely ornamental. Some originals of these were found during the restoration. *

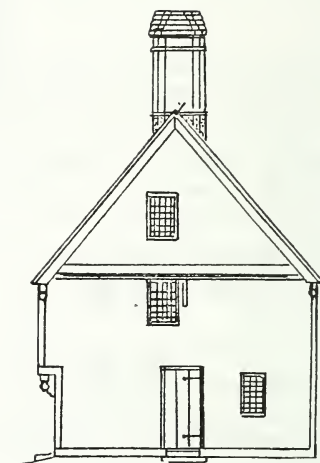


The design of the Capen exterior is elegant in its simplicity. The strong overhangs of the front and gable ends emphasize the horizontal lines which are repeated by the fine shadows of the dark brown clapboards and weatherbeaten shingles. The severity of the horizontal line is relieved by the brackets and graceful drop pendants at each corner. The influence of sixteenth and seventeenth century English architecture is apparent in the pilastered chimney, square-paned leaded casements, framed overhangs, and decorative carvings. 23

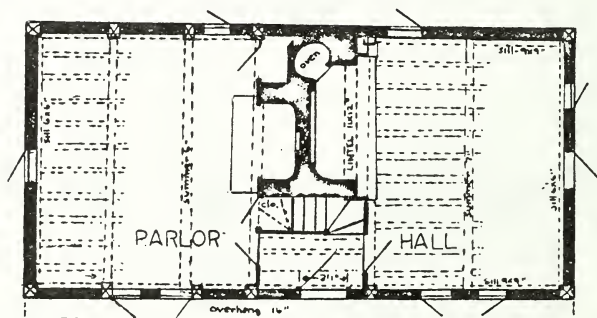




WEST ELEVATION



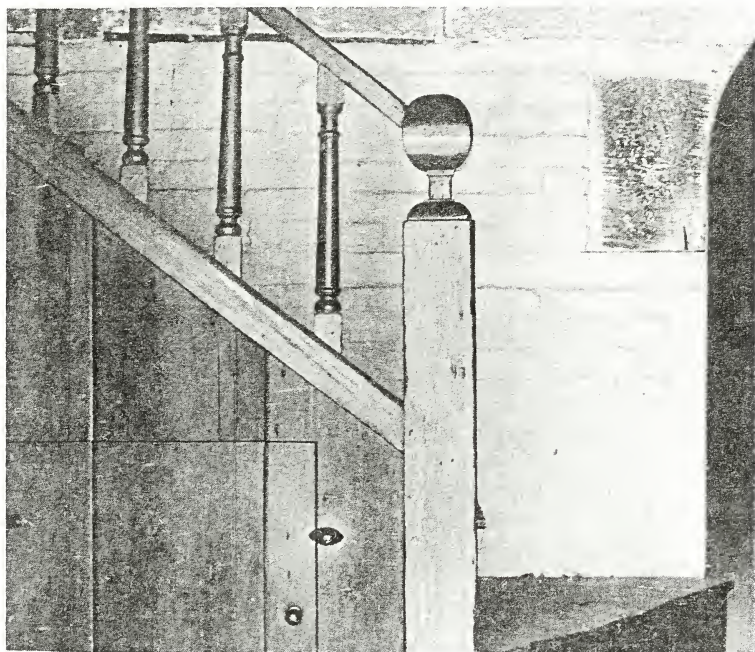
EAST ELEVATION



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

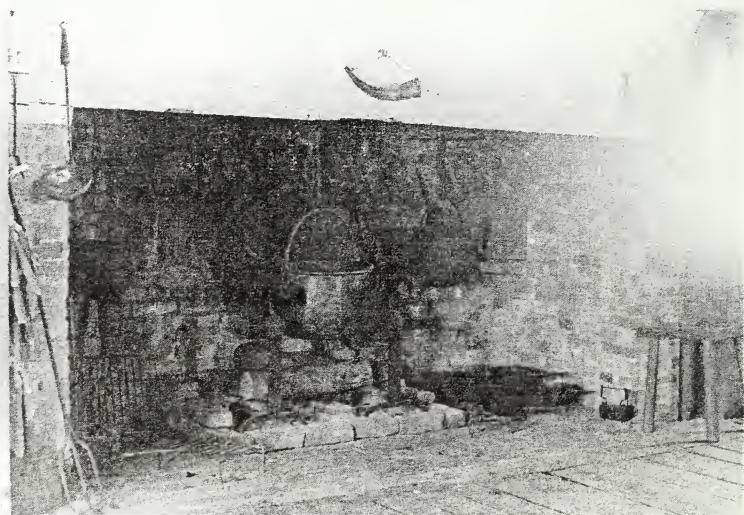
MEASURED DRAWINGS BY
DONALD MILLAR

The interior of the "Parson" Capen House follows the familiar two room type with a central chimney and a staircase porch. The rooms are large. The hall is 20 ft. by 16 ft. As a rule the hall was always the larger room, but this being a minister's home the parlor is larger: 20 ft. by 17 ft. 6 inches. The two sleeping chambers upstairs were known as the "hall chamber" and the "parlor chamber."



The entry, known as the porch, contains the steep, winding staircase in front of the huge chimney. The three diagonal treads, called winders, are framed into the large newel post. The carved newel and turned balusters, all of oak, are the originals. The brick work and the end of the huge lintel of the hall fireplace are exposed. This is a definite sign of an early work. The floor of the porch is several inches lower than the rooms and the framing of the floor joists is visible. On either side of the porch, batten doors lead to the hall and parlor. These doors are light and thin. A single thickness of vertical boards are fastened together with three horizontal battens on the porch side. Strap hinges fasten the door to the frame. Hinge shapes of the "H", "L", and "butterfly" were also common.

The hall fireplace is mammoth, 8 ft., 4 inches wide, 4 ft. high, and 3 ft. deep. The fireplaces were referred to as "chimneys" in the vernacular of the time.²⁴ The hall "chimney" functioned as both a heating and cooking unit. The back corners are curved and two trammel bars hang from the flue. This method of suspending pots and kettles, also called the lug pole, is a method used earlier than the crane. Inside the fireplace, to the right, is the brick oven and another small niche where the tinder box and tobacco pipes were kept. To reach the oven the housewife had to stoop under the huge lintel and stand inside the fireplace.²⁵ This wooden lintel, called the mantel tree, which spans the top of the fireplace opening is 11 x 12 inches wide in the Capen House. It is the end of this beam that can be seen in the stairway wall.



The walls of the hall are covered with broad, horizontal wainscoting which was a common finish of the seventeenth century. The ceiling is low and the girts, summer beam, and joists are visible. The floor is a double layer of oak boards, one foot or more wide. The sill is also visible and projects into the room. This is typical of the period of the Capen House. In later houses the sills were concealed by floor boards.²⁶

The "hall" was the main room and the center of family life. Implements of cooking, sewing, spinning, weaving, candlemaking, soap boiling, cheesemaking, brewing and so forth are found in all corners. The furniture is simple and solid, mainly of oak, pine, and maple. The tall, thin legged bench is known as the wash bench. The huge trestle table was derived from the stretcher table of Medieval England. ²⁷ A chair was a treasured item. The major seating in the hall were crude, backless benches like the one pulled up to the hearth. The exception, of course, was the large settle placed at right angles to the fireplace. Its high back is enclosed right down to the floor, to keep out drafts.

Lighting was poor in the rooms of early American homes. The small windows did not let in much light. Wall sconces may be seen around the rooms. Grease lamps and homemade candles were the main sources of artificial light.

The parlor was the best room and the place for the family's treasures: its chairs and chests. The fireplace is smaller than the kitchen "chimney." It is 4 feet high, 6 feet long and 2 1/2 feet deep. At each end there is a wainscoted closet door. The framing beams are all exposed, but the wall and ceiling areas are plastered. Plaster was made with cow and horse hairs mixed with lime and sand. Since lime was scarce, a plastered room was a definite sign of wealth on the part of the builder. ²⁸ It is in this room that the date on which the frame was raised is incised in one of the summer beams.

The Topsfield Historical Society considers itself fortunate in possessing the food hutch which stands against the south wall. It was made locally before 1675 and was found in a farmhouse three miles away. Antiquarians believe it to be unique in America, although the style was common to the period in England. One of the finest points of the hutch is the fact that the back legs were made shorter than the front, so that the hutch would rest evenly, with the back legs on the raised sill against the wall. ²⁹ Furniture pieces like this hutch and the hall settle were often painted. Red paint was the first color used in the Colonies and was made by mixing colored clay with sour milk. ³⁰

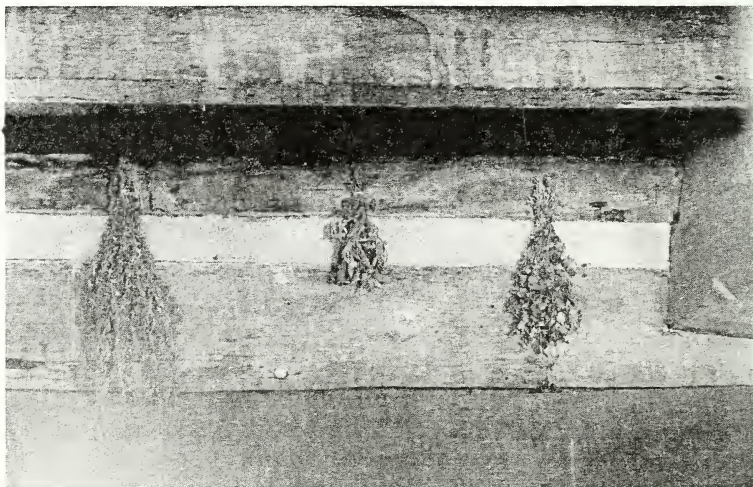
A fine gate-leg table and Carver arm chairs are the central pieces in this room. One of the baluster-back Carver chairs is inscribed on the back of the top rail, "P. Capen 1708." It is believed that this was given, as part of the wedding furniture, to Priscilla Capen the Parson's daughter, who was married that year. ³¹

On the wall in one corner is an oaken grill with a double row of spindles. The turnings very closely resemble those of the Brewster and Carver chairs of this time. A photograph taken before the restoration shows it built in above the closet door next to the entry way.

The chair by the window is a solid oak wainscot chair. The simplicity of the top and the uncarved back panel indicate that it was made in America rather than imported from England. The back legs which are extensions of the back panel also indicate American work.³²

The "press bed" in the northwest corner dates from between 1700 and 1715. The large feet at the head end should be bolted to the floor and the legs at the foot are hinged, so that the bed may be folded against the wall when not in use. It was not commonly used by the family, but by travelers who might spend the night. Examples of press beds are quite rare.

Other pieces of interest include a cradle, some Pilgrim slat back chairs and a plain panelled oak chest. A small, ball foot desk rests on the food hutch mentioned previously.



In 1913 the "Parson" Capen House was purchased by the Topsfield Historical Society for \$2000.00.³³ A great deal of restoration was necessary, done under the direction of George Francis Dow, secretary of the society. It is one of the oldest and best preserved dwellings in the town.

The Historical Collection, Volume XX of Topsfield shows that the cost of restoration of the house after purchase was \$2461.12. The account includes such items as:

1913

Oct. 25	Spence, Bell and Co.	\$ 94.00
	21 casement windows	
Nov. 29	Morrison and Young	62.83
	pine wainscoting	
Dec. 8	G. H. Williams	118.56
	mason work, chimney and fireplaces	

1914

Feb. 24	H. R. Wildes	1099.76
	carpenter work and lumber	
	N. E. Reed Company	6.00
	reseating chairs	
	F. W. Dingle	67.83
	ironwork	
	George F. Dow	75.04
	misc. payments: hardware, kitchen utensils, curtains, opening supper expenses	
Apr. 6	W. A. Webb	88.73
	plastering, building	
May 5	M. B. Paige and Co.	17.15
	pottery reproductions	
	Spence, Bell, and Co.	7.39
	repairing leaded casements	

The oak framing timbers of the house are all original but much of the interior woodwork and all of the shingles and clapboards are new. So much necessary restoration has given the house a new appearance. Yet, this serves to show what a house of the period looked like "fresh from the hands of its builders." ³⁴ The interior walls which had been left unpainted acquired the soft, satin brown patina from years of exposure to smoke and sunlight. This texture can never be imitated in reproduction.

Recently what is believed to be an 18th century door of the "Parson" Capen House was found in the cellar. It is double thickness, panelled in the form of a double cross.

All of the fireplaces and their lintels are original but the pilastered chimney is a reproduction. Donald Millar, in his article on the Capen House, makes some interesting observations on the chimney design. Evidently, it is a copy of that of the old Hunt House in Salem, built some twenty years before the Capen House. The restored chimney-top of the Capen House, because of a mistake of the bricklayer, is too thin but gives the right effect when seen from the front. 35

The "Parson" Capen House, though an exceptional example, is only one of the numerous surviving seventeenth century houses. Eighty are known in New England, many of which have been carefully restored. "The cold climate, solid construction, and long persistent village economy has preserved a larger number of seventeenth century houses in New England than in any other region of the United States today," thus making New England the greatest source of knowledge of this architecture. 36

At the completion of the restoration of the "Parson" Capen House the Topsfield Historical Society entertained guests at an old fashioned "house warming" on January 14, 1914. Fires blazed in the fireplaces and supper was served in the seventeenth century manner. The 125 official guests ate baked beans, salted meat, brown and rye bread, Indian pudding, pan dowdy, and pumpkin and apple pie off wooden plates with broad bladed metal knives and pewter spoons. Forks were practically unknown before 1670 and were not in common use until the eighteenth century. Cider and milk were served in tall, black-glaze mugs and the food was all cooked over the fire and in the brick oven. The table linens were hand woven. 37

Today the "Parson" Capen House is open to visitors from mid June to mid September. Its value to the student of American Colonial culture is evident.

The Capen House, appropriately furnished affords a perfect idea of the homes and surroundings of the Pilgrims and descendants in New England in the latter half of the seventeenth century when the hardships of the early days were over. It is evident that in spite of their dour and tenacious character, their simplicity of life, and their preoccupation with

religion, they were men of culture and refined taste. And here in the home of one of their honored ministers we see not only the most attractive side of their life but also its essentially English origin. For if Parson Capen's house could be transported overseas and planted somewhere in the little Essex hamlet of Toppesfield it would harmonize perfectly with the pleasant rolling country, the thatched cottages and the sturdy oak trees of the district of England which was the real cradle of the Pilgrim Fathers. 38

ALL FOOTNOTES IN NUMERICAL ORDER

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2. Martin Shaw Briggs, *The Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers in England and America 1620-1685* (New York, 1932),p.149-154.
3. Donald Millar, "A Seventeenth Century New England House," *Architectural Record*, XXXVIII (July-December, 1915) ,p.349.
4. Hugh Morrison, *Early American Architecture from the First Colonial Settlements to the National Period* (New York, 1952), p.59.
5. George Francis Dow, *The History of Topsfield, Massachusetts* (Topsfield, 1940), p.448
6. Dow, *History*, p.450.
7. Morrison, p.24
8. Briggs, p.155
9. Morrison, p.21
10. Morrison, p.24
11. Mary Gould Earle, *The Early American House* (New York, 1949), p.20.
12. Dow, *History*, p.449
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17. Morrison, p.28
18. Morrison, p.30.
19. Gould, p.20
20. Briggs, p.168
21. Dow, *History*, p.448
22. Morrison, p.34.
- * Millar, *Architectural Record*, p.361
23. Briggs, p.191.

24. George Francis Dow, *Domestic Life in New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Topsfield, 1925), p.15

25. Dow, *Domestic Life*, p. 17.

32. Nutting, p.281.

26. Dow, *History*, p. 450.

33. Dow, *History*, p.445.

27. Morrison, p.42.

34. Dow, *History*, p.450.

28. Gould, p.20.

35. Millar, *Architectural Record*, p. 350.

29. Wallace Nutting, *Furniture*, p.259

36. Briggs, p.20

30. Morrison, p.42

37. Dow, *History*, preface.

31, Dow, *History*

38. Briggs, p.192

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Wilkscraft
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